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## *History Textbooks and Nationalism*

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**T**he national memory is the existential part of the nations. Each nation-state or each nationalism creates its own national memory, which justifies the existence of the state in the particular territory and contributes to the unity of the nation. Therefore, cult of history and cult of the nation are not to separate. This turns the nation into a community of myths. The myths are symbolically influential structures, which help to the permanent functions of legitimization and regulation of the national being. In the myth, we find the past, the present and the future of the nation united. Therefore, national memory is impossible without myths. Cult of history and myths are the essential part of the national memory as the ideological system of the nation [Monika Flacke, p.19-20].

It is a well known phenomenon that the national historiography reproduces the national memory through the adaptation of the mechanisms of forgetting and remembrance in a selective way. The ultimate goal of such historiography is not an accurate account of the history but an effective and efficient contribution to national goals and unity. "History is always selective, in the same way that it describes the group, it also constructs it, invents it. In recent history, nation-states have incorporated just such a unity, where acknowledging the significance of history was linked with a missionary consciousness regarding the

future and affecting the actions of the present” (Falk Pingel). History is not merely knowledge about the past. The conveying of such knowledge determines meaning for the present; it is constructed to give a particular direction for the future. Memory and forgetting refer to the past and construct a certain history. The views or aims of different groups concerning the future become of primary importance in articulating accounts of the past. In other words, when talking of the past one implicitly talks of the future as well [Yiannis Papadakis, p.88].

National memory is a form of the collective memory, which functions like a “theater” of certain chosen events, and is only indirectly transmittable through media, education, and not directly through the individual participation. These events need to be reconstructed in such a symbolic way so that they can operate “properly” in the national memory. There is no such a thing as the past as organic part of the memory, simply because there are no pure facts of the memory. Only after the symbolic reconstruction can “these events” or “facts” become functional for the national consciousness. And this process of symbolic reconstruction is not free of political interests and orientations of the nation in the given moment of history. Above all, national memory is an unavoidable condition for the construction and embodiment of the national identity.

It is in this context that, especially in the 19th century, the national historiography has been developed and accompanied the process of nation building. Through national historiography, which became an important element of the national education, each member of the nation anticipated the collective memory, which in turn, contributed to the national integration.

In fact, the homogenization and integration of the people into the “national whole” in the modern societies of

19th century had two dimensions. At one level, it was the economic, social and political modernity and at another level, it was the national education, based on national historiography, which were at the service of the national integration. It is important to note that, in the countries with “weak modernity”, the instrumentalization and the ideological use of the history achieved its apex. However, the use of history as an instrument for the construction of the nation is rather universal.

The role of history in nation-building and nationalism is double. It helps to develop a national, collective self-esteem but at the same time, it turns against all those, who are considered as “others”. In other words, the national self-esteem is relational, hence its contraction constructs often the negative “others”. The “others” are to be found as well within as outside of the nation. It has to be added that, especially in the cases, where nation-building and state-building were accompanied by wars, which was and is the most often the case, the demonization of the “others” turned out to be perceived almost as “natural”. The process of inclusion and exclusion are also at work by determining the cultural boundaries, which in turn construct the cultural identity. Through the common cultural identity, a member of the nation participates to the “collective self-esteem”. This creates a collective narcissism, which legitimizes one’s own nation in its relations to “the others”. “The love for one’s own nation [...] is often love for a collective subject named ‘We’. What ever else it might mean this, it is also a kind of self love” [Dieter Langewiesche, p. 50].

If one considers history textbooks under the light of what has been said above, and given that, history textbooks are including, presenting and representing all the functions, mentioned here, such as, construction of the national and cultural identity, exclusion and demonization of

“the others” within and outside the nation, creation of collective self-esteem and legitimization, it is obvious that any project which aims at the critical study and amendment of history textbooks, will face a certain amount of difficulties. When it comes to Southeastern Europe, where we have “weak modernity” and still open national questions, these tasks become even more difficult.

The experience we had around and after the Workshop in Cyprus gives us a clear picture about the obstacles and difficulties of the work on textbooks. As soon as it became known that the Textbooks Committee would organize the Workshop “Teaching Cyprus” in Pyla (Cyprus), a reaction in the press of both communities in Cyprus started. The arguments were similar: “they want to change our history” or “they want to denationalize us”. In many ways the discussions were centered around the fear of losing national identity. However, there were political fears also. According to some views, the textbooks initiative was “a satanic plan” for preparing and imposing a political solution on to Cyprus, which was not to be accepted. The discussions grew rapidly and both, the Greek Cypriot Ex-Minister, and the Minister of Education in office, took positions and condemned publicly the textbook workshop in Pyla. In the Turkish Cypriot community the reaction took also “practical” dimensions. The officials hindered the participation of a Turkish scholar at the workshop.

As the example of Cyprus shows, for the better working conditions and concrete achievements, the textbook projects need to secure a good deal of public and political support. In fact, the revision of schoolbooks is, in any society, a challenge to nationalistic education and hence, part of the democratization in a wider sense, and can only be realized, if there is the necessary political will. In the countries where the political will lacks, the initiatives within the civil society

can raise the issues of democratic education. Therefore the support of the schoolteachers and educators for the textbooks project is of great importance. In order to secure the support of the civil society, it is necessary that textbook projects should be explained in the best possible way. Fears of “losing the national identity” and “distorting” the national history ought to be well addressed and taken into consideration. It must be given emphasis to the fact that textbook projects do not seek to change and distort “the historical facts”. In fact, to liberate ourselves from stereotypes and negative images, above all, creates a better ground for understanding our own history and hence, ourselves. The demystification of history can liberate national identity from national narcissism, which in turn, may contribute to individual and national awareness.

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